

Scattering and Gathering

The story of the Bible is one of scattering and gathering.

Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, were together with the Lord, before sin broke their relationship, and they were scattered. It's not so much that God scattered them, as that they scattered themselves by turning away from God's wish towards their own. The ultimate expression of this scattering was the tower of Babel, in which the people, each pursuing their own vainglory, could no longer even understand one another — this was the truest loneliness of the pursuit of one's self.

Israel was gathered together eventually under the Word of God — gathered out of slavery, rescued from death into the desert, the place of the word. They were fed on manna, and gathered to the tabernacle. But they were not truly united — when the twelve tribes took the land of Canaan they immediately fought. In other words, they were still scattered.

David and Solomon united Israel under monarchy, with worship focused on the Jerusalem temple. But this lasted only two generations — the people were disobedient to God's word and broadly showed no respect for the Lord. After a few hundred years their disunity led to exile in Babylon, just as the first disunity had led to Babel.

Exile ended, but Israel remained scattered — much of the diaspora never returned, they were still a client state of Persia, Greece, Rome. Nonetheless, the prophets relentlessly promised that God would gather his people.

The only way for us to be united was for God to come in person. Jesus showed what 'gathering' truly meant — he was perfect in unity with the Father and the Spirit, and his followers showed the truest unity yet in confession at Golgotha, and joy on Easter morning. This unity was confirmed at Pentecost in the great, unifying gift of the Spirit, the gift of God's love. This was also the true undoing of the tower of Babel — though they spoke different languages, they all heard God speaking. After this pockets of true gathering appeared everywhere: churches.

Mothering Sunday celebrates mothers, celebrates the midpoint of Lent, but also celebrates gathering back to the mother church. This year we are engaging in a deliberate act of gathering together, a deliberate act of seeing the church as bigger than immediately local church. Seeing that churches are always connected — not just by the artificiality of benefices but by the unity and mutual service that marks union with Christ.

The church, gathered in Jesus, has the most extraordinary role in unifying the world. Church should be a place where people of every ethnic background should feel comfortable. Where every age should feel welcomed. Where male and female, wealth and poverty and everything in between is ok, because we see that God loves us, and God loves *them*, and if God loves *them*, then *they* are us, too!

Church is practice for heaven. Doubtless it may not always feel like that, but church is the practice of putting down our differences, our wants, in order (for an hour or so) to be united in confessing our tendency to scatter from God's will, and to be united in gratitude, worship and love.

The prodigal son is Jesus's best parable, and it tells this grand, Biblical arc perfectly. The prodigal 'self-scatters', just as Adam and Eve did, putting 'I want' before 'I love'. His father permits this (and it occurs to me that there is a lot of wisdom in willingly allowing the prodigal to go, so that he may later willingly return). So the prodigal goes off and indulges all his wants until he sees through the waste, the damage, the vapidness and the disconnection of a 'want'-driven life, and, penniless, and with his ego humbled, he thinks service to God is better than service to his own desires.

He returns, and love bids him welcome — running to greet him, thrilled at the reunion. Love bids a feast of celebration — unity is always celebrated with shared food — but there's a problem. The elder brother. Here there is not love, but resentment, which is jealousy by another name. The elder brother has been disunity disguised as unity all along, and it takes the prodigal's return to show this up.

This is the big thing — what matters is your desire to be there, not your pride, not your track record. The prodigal knows quite how special it is to be gathered back to the Father's house, while the elder believes he is owed something.

Henri Nouwen's book of the return of the Prodigal Son reminds us that each of us at some point plays each of the roles we see in this story. We would not be here (or should not be here?) unless we have been the prodigal returning home. We are always the returning prodigal.

In our role as Christians in unity with God through the Holy Spirit it is also always our role to be the welcoming Father, running to meet returning prodigals. We are ambassadors for God. We, like the Father, should be willing to throw away our dignity to express wholehearted welcome. This is why I won't put restrictions on receiving communion: if Love bids you welcome, who am I to be gatekeeper?

We have all been the older brother. We have all, at times, wanted church to be just the way we want it, with just the music we like, in an atmosphere that is just right — be it serenely contemplative, boisterously joyful or thunderously worshipful. I don't know what heavenly worship will be like — harps or hip-hop; choirs, kerrang! or klezmer. But the big difference will be the unity by which we worship, and the joy in the feasting.

The Bible is a story of scattering and gathering. May God soften our hearts, that we may be gathered ever more lovingly and joyfully, while being gatherers ourselves.

Amen.

Bibliography

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Henri Nouwen: The Return of the Prodigal Son (Doubleday, New York, 1992)